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NEA/MAG FOR HARRIS

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV KMPI TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES MOUNTING, IN SPITE OF RHETORIC ON HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

REF: A. STATE 200959

- 1B. TUNIS 2844
- 1C. TUNIS 2639
- 1D. TUNIS 1658
- 1E. TUNIS 1206
- 1F. TUNIS 2661
- 1G. TUNIS 2688

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 B & D

11. (C) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: THE GOT CELEBRATED HUMAN RIGHTS DAY ON DECEMBER 10TH WITH THE USUAL SPEECHES ABOUT TUNISIA'S RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, AND WITH NEW INITIATIVES FOCUSED ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. MEANWHILE, HARASSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, OPPOSITION PARTY ACTIVISTS, INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS, AND FAMILIES OF AN-NAHDHA PRISONERS CONTINUES AS STRONG, OR STRONGER, THAN EVER. BELOW ARE SEVERAL, OF MANY, RECENT INCIDENTS CONTRADICTING THE GOT'S PERENNIAL PLEDGE TO "GUARANTEE THE RIGHTS OF ALL CITIZENS AND HONOR THE DEFENDERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS." END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY CELEBRATIONS BLOCKED

12. (C) HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION ACTIVIST KHEMAIS CHEMMARI TOLD POLCOUNS THAT THE GOT PREVENTED 17 NGO OR CIVIL SOCIETY EVENTS THAT HAD BEEN SCHEDULED IN COMMEMORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DAY. THESE BLOCKED MEETINGS INCLUDED A "NON-POLITICAL" COMMEMORATION AT A TUNIS THEATER, A DEMONSTRATION BY THE 18 OCTOBER MOVEMENT (REF F) IN FRONT OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE GOVERNOR OF TUNIS, A PRESS CONFERENCE BY THE UNAUTHORIZED TUNISIAN GREEN PARTY, AN 18 OCTOBER MEETING IN SFAX, AND TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE (REF G) GATHERINGS IN REGIONAL CITIES JENDOUBA, BIZERTE, MONASTIR, NEFTA, KELIBIA, AND SOUSSE. ACCORDING TO CHEMMARI, IN ADDITION TO GOT COMMEMORATIONS OR EVENTS BY GOT-LOYAL ORGANIZATIONS, ONLY THREE INDEPENDENT EVENTS TOOK PLACE TO MARK HUMAN RIGHTS DAY: A DEBATE HOSTED BY OPPOSITION PARTY DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST MOVEMENT (MDS), AN OPPOSITION PARTY PDP EVENT HELD IN BIZERTE IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE 18 OCTOBER MOVEMENT, AND A ROUNDTABLE HELD BY PDP ON FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION. POLOFFS ATTENDED THE LATTER EVENT WHICH WAS ALSO ATTENDED BY A WHO'S WHO OF THE TUNISIAN OPPOSITION/ACTIVIST COMMUNITY. UNIFORMED AND PLAIN-CLOTHED POLICE SURROUNDED PDP HEADQUARTERS DURING THE EVENT, ALTHOUGH NO ONE WAS BARRED ENTRY.

MARZOUKI RETURNS

13. (C) OPPOSITION LEADER MONCEF MARZOUKI, WHO FOR YEARS WAS LIVING IN SELF-IMPOSED EXILE IN FRANCE, MADE A MUCH-PUBLICIZED RETURN TO TUNISIA IN LATE OCTOBER. HIS RETURN FOLLOWED AN APPEARANCE ON AL-JAZEERA DURING WHICH HE CALLED ON TUNISIANS TO EMBARK ON A CAMPAIGN OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. MARZOUKI'S APPEARANCE PROMPTED THE GOT TO CLOSE ITS EMBASSY IN DOHA IN PROTEST OF AL JAZEERA'S COVERAGE OF TUNISIA (REF C). ON OCTOBER 21, MARZOUKI WAS REPORTEDLY CALLED TO COURT TO FACE CHARGES OF "INCITING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE." HE DID NOT APPEAR IN COURT NOR DID HE RESPOND TO A SUBSEQUENT CONVOCATION. FETHI JERBI, A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AND MEMBER OF MARZOUKI'S UNAUTHORIZED CONGRESS FOR THE REPUBLIC (CPR) PARTY, TOLD POLOFF THAT MARZOUKI REFUSED TO RESPOND TO A JUDICIAL SYSTEM THAT WAS NOT INDEPENDENT. JERBI SAID MARZOUKI DID NOT FEAR ARREST, AND THAT HE THOUGHT MARZOUKI'S HIGH INTERNATIONAL PROFILE WOULD PROTECT HIM.

14. SINCE MARZOUKI'S RETURN IN OCTOBER, HE HAS REPORTEDLY SUFFERED FROM INTENSE POLICE SURVEILLANCE AND HARASSMENT, AND AT TIMES HAS BEEN PREVENTED FROM LEAVING HIS HOME REGION OF SOUSSE. HE HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN UNABLE TO RECEIVE VISITORS AT HIS HOME. JERBI TOLD POLOFF THAT MARZOUKI PLANS TO TRAVEL TO FRANCE ON DECEMBER 21 BUT FEARS THAT THE GOT MAY EMPLOY ITS COMMON TACTIC OF CONFISCATING HIS PASSPORT OR OTHERWISE PREVENTING HIM FROM TRAVELING.

ABBOU HARASSED, AGAIN

15. (C) ON DECEMBER 7, SAMIA ABOU, THE WIFE OF LAWYER/ACTIVIST MOHAMED ABOU, SENTENCED TO THREE AND A HALF YEARS IN PRISON ON CHARGES STEMMING FROM ARTICLES PUBLISHED ON-LINE (REF D), WAS PREVENTED FROM VISITING HER HUSBAND IN PRISON IN EL KEF, THREE HOURS WEST OF TUNIS. SHE WAS ACCCOMPANIED EN ROUTE TO THE PRISON BY INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

SLIM BOUKHDIR, LAWYER SAMIR BEN AMAR, AND OPPOSITION POLITICAL FIGURE MONCEF MARZOUKI. (NB: MOHAMED ABOU IS A MEMBER OF MARZOUKI'S CPR POLITICAL PARTY.) ACCORDING TO SAMIA ABOU, THE GROUP WAS STOPPED AT THREE SUCCESSIVE POLICE BARRICADES. THE FINAL BARRICADE WAS ALLEGEDLY MANNED BY APPROXIMATELY 40 POLICE OFFICERS. WHILE THE GROUP EVENTUALLY WAS ALLOWED TO CONTINUE, A GROUP OF YOUTHS ALLEGEDLY VERBALLY AND PHYSICALLY HARASSED ABOU AND COMPANY WHILE THEY WERE STOPPED AT A RESTAURANT. ON ARRIVING AT THE PRISON, ANOTHER GROUP OF YOUNG MEN REPORTEDLY PHYSICALLY ABUSED ABOU, MARZOUKI, BENDHIR AND BEN AMAR, AND SHATTERED THE MIRRORS ON BEN AMAR'S VEHICLE. ACCORDING TO A REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS' COMMUNIQUE, POLICE STOOD BY AND WATCHED WHILE THIS VIOLENT ALTERCATION TOOK PLACE, AND FILMED IT. DOMESTIC HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS ALLEGED THAT THE YOUTHS WERE ACTING ON GOT INSTRUCTION TO HARASS ABOU AND HER COMPANIONS. FINALLY, THE GROUP RETURNED TO TUNIS WITHOUT HAVING BEEN ABLE TO MEET WITH MOHAMED ABOU. POLOFF MET WITH SAMIA ABOU ON DECEMBER 8, AND SHE APPEARED WEAK, TIRED, AND VISIBLY SHAKEN FROM THE PREVIOUS DAY'S INCIDENTS.

16. (C) ON DECEMBER 14, SAMIA ABOU VISITED HER HUSBAND WITHOUT INCIDENT. MARZOUKI, WHOSE PRESENCE MANY OBSERVERS ASSUME PROVOKED THE STRONG GOT REACTION THE PREVIOUS WEEK, DID NOT ACCOMPANY HER. ABOU DESCRIBED HER HUSBAND AS IN POOR HEALTH, AND SAID HE WAS ON HUNGER STRIKE.

HAJJI DETAINED

17. (C) ON DECEMBER 18, AL-JAZEERA CORRESPONDENT AND HEAD OF THE UNAUTHORIZED TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS SYNDICATE (SJT), LOTFI HAJJI (REF B), WAS TAKEN INTO POLICE CUSTODY AT HIS HOME IN BIZERTE AND BROUGHT TO TUNIS. HAJJI HAD EARLIER IN THE DAY TWICE BEEN CONVOKED, BY PHONE AND IN WRITING, TO POLICE FACILITIES IN TUNIS, BUT HAD REFUSED TO OBEY. HAJJI TOLD POLOFF THAT DURING HIS DETENTION IN TUNIS HE WAS TOLD THAT HIS WORK AS AN AL JAZEERA CORRESPONDENT WAS ILLEGAL. (NB: THE GOT HAS REFUSED TO ISSUE HAJJI JOURNALISTIC ACCREDITATION FOR

HIS WORK FOR AL JAZEERA.) POLICE OFFICIALS ALLEGEDLY TOLD HIM TO SIGN AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT HE HAD BEEN INSTRUCTED TO STOP REPORTING FOR AL JAZEERA. HAJJI REFUSED AND WAS RELEASED AFTER SEVERAL HOURS. (NB: HAJJI IS PERIODICALLY DETAINED FOR VARIOUS REASONS APPARENTLY IN AN ATTEMPT TO INTIMIDATE HIM.)

COMMENT

¶8. (C) THE ABOVE EXAMPLES ARE JUST A SAMPLING OF THE MANY INCIDENTS REPORTED DAILY BY INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND ACTIVISTS. WHILE PERIODIC GLIMMERS OF PROGRESS CAN BE SEEN, MOST RECENTLY IN THE AUTHORIZATION OF A NEW OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER (REF E), THE GOT HAS SHOWN NO FUNDAMENTAL WILLINGNESS TO EASE ITS CONTROL OVER DOMESTIC POLITICAL ACTIVITY. POST WILL RAISE THESE INCIDENTS, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SECRETARY'S RECENTLY ANNOUNCED DEFENDING THE DEFENDERS INITIATIVE (REF A), WITH THE MFA AT THE EARLIEST AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY.
BALLARD